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ABSTRACT

Three basic concepts help to describe the author's experience as a school board member whose "real" job is working in the English Department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee as a part of the academic staff: (1) personnel matters; (2) matters of budget; and (3) university/K-12 collaboration. When school boards decide that the K-12 budget is too fat and that expenses need to be cut, they look first at in-service training for teachers and staff. Three free programs planned by the Milwaukee Area Academic Alliance in English each year normally attract 60-70 teachers. English teachers from middle school through the University level exchange ideas--from schools throughout southeastern Wisconsin and northern Illinois. One reason for the success of the Alliance is that programs are designed to appeal to a diverse group of prospective participants. The collegial relationships that are established between college, middle and high school teachers, and school board members through the Alliance effectively diminish artificial barriers between them. (CR)

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ALLIANCES AND SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Though I don't want to bore you with details about my motivation for seeking public office, I do want to share a bit of the story because I think my story communicates some of the basic collaborative philosophy which brings me to this conference today speaking about a Milwaukee English Teachers Alliance. I am beginning my eighth year as a member of the Shorewood School Board; I'm serving my third (and final) three-year term. Though there have been many hyper-ventilation kind of moments (which I won't describe today) since I was elected for my first term in 1991, I have grown professionally and personally in the last eight years.

Three basic concepts help to describe my experience as a school board member whose "real" job is working in the English Department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee as a part of the academic staff. I've labeled the three concepts as: 1) personnel matters; 2) matters of budget; and 3) (the topic that will take up most of my presentation today,) university/K - 12 collaboration. The three come together especially around the issue of how to spend money. The matter of budget is one deserving of attention at another time and perhaps a conference other than the 4 C's. Suffice it to say, that because I have served as a school board member, I have developed an appreciation and an admiration bordering on awe at the way public universities organize their budgets as tax support for public higher

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education, at least in Wisconsin, does not keep up with inflation, personnel needs, and maintenance issues.

In terms of personnel, all full-time teacher and administrative hiring as well as denial of tenure occur at the public school board level. Though we don't call a non-renewal of a teacher's contract denial of tenure, basically that is one of the functions the law gives school boards permission to do and boards base their decisions on administrative recommendations. That means, the board must be extremely cautious and careful in administrative hiring and evaluation as well. Hiring a superintendent, one of the chief responsibilities of any school board in Wisconsin, has provided me with rich experience. All of this background is what leads me to give you my perspective on the "history of the Milwaukee Area Academic Alliance in English."

When school boards decide that the K-12 budget is too fat and that expenses need to be cut so that property taxes will decline, where in the budget do you think boards look first? If you answered in-service training for teachers and staff, you win the jackpot. The result is that most school districts have cut in-service teacher training programs which, in my judgment, affects education negatively.

Boards also hear that teachers despise in-service training, many of them, because they aren't interested in the general topics that the system offers during a one or two day period usually in mid-February and early March (Shorewood had one day around President's day and another on March 20). So the board asks, why do we pay for all of this if the teachers hate it?

Yet, the three programs that the Milwaukee Area Academic Alliance in English plans each year normally attracts 60 -70 teachers on a Saturday morning. No pay; no break from the week of classes they just finished; little, if any recognition from their school administrators that they even showed up. Why this scenario?

From my perspective at the University and a member of one school board, I'd like to make some claims about the success of the Alliance, one of the best opportunities for in-service training for English teachers in southeastern Wisconsin. First of all, it's free. Teachers show up on Saturday mornings three times a year and spend approximately four hours of their week-end engaged in a dialogue devoted to English instruction. A part of the attraction is that English teachers from middle school through the University level exchange ideas - not just from one school, from schools throughout southeastern Wisconsin and northern Illinois. They don't have to pay for the coffee and snacks. The meetings are planned by a group of teachers and University administrators who listen to what teachers want to talk about, this year, we arrived at the topic "Teaching Multi-Cultural Literature" because it seemed that so many teachers were grappling with that idea, not just the Beyond the Culture Wars issue at Universities addressed by Jerry Graff, but the very real concern of English teachers at the high school and middle school levels who teach an Euro-centric curriculum to an increasingly diverse multi-cultural student body.

So, one reason for the success of the Alliance over these

many years has had to do with the fact that programs are designed to appeal to a diverse group of prospective participants. High school, middle school, and college teachers collaborate to plan the program. I've been involved with planning the Alliance programs for the past two years and as a board member, I come away with such respect for high school and middle school English teachers who often teach classes of more than 30 students six hours every day and strive for relevancy. My role with the Alliance gives me practical awareness of the professionalism of English and language arts teachers so that when I wear my other hat as school board member, I'm able to represent my impression of the dedicated work of teachers. Often, I think that kind of voice is missing from school board discussion and therefore, decisions potentially detrimental to the educational process result. It's unhealthy.

Does the University gain anything because I'm on a school board and also a part of the Alliance? I'd like to think so. For example, though high school and middle school teachers care about theory, they want to discover ways of teaching and doing that other teachers in other districts are using. Even though University English professors might be more tied in to the theory, they have been responsive to participants' needs and have been able to offer a "how to" and "exchange of ideas" as a portion of each Alliance program.

One last observation, the collegial relationships that are established between college and middle and high school teachers through the Alliance effectively diminish artificial barriers

between professor and high or middle school teacher, between school board member and teacher. We all meet together three times a year to share ideas that serve to improve composition and communication at the classroom level and I'm delighted to be a part of that process.